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search

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[Back](#)
[Result](#)

A Glimpse of the Future

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by Sharon Cunningham and Ashley Scharf

Since the Teachers for Tomorrow program began here in Virginia four years ago, I (Sharon) have watched my honors-level senior students who want to explore teaching as a career grow in confidence and maturity as they've taken part in it. (Virginia instructors are trained in and utilize South Carolina's Teacher Cadet curriculum.) Teachers for Tomorrow includes both theory and practice: My students observe exemplary elementary and middle school teachers and then choose a particular grade level and subject for their extensive field experience. During the second semester, they spend 12 weeks with mentor teachers at three elementary schools, one middle school and two high schools, where they get to experience firsthand what it's like to be "real" teachers. On an alternating day block schedule, they dress professionally, fight copy machines, plan and teach lessons, develop portfolios, create bulletin boards, network with other teachers, grade papers, and, best of all, work with students.

One of my students from last school year, Ashley Scharf, wrote an especially poignant profile of a third grader as part of her portfolio. Her mentor teacher was Jane Schwarz, third grade teacher at Dominion Trail Elementary in Ashburn. The best part is not just about the child Ashley profiled – it is Ashley's experience in the classroom with him and the insight that she gained. The child's name has been changed to protect his privacy. Here is Ashley's account:

The first week of my field experience I got to know each of Ms. Schwarz's students. One child in particular interested me. It wasn't because he was the smartest, the cutest or the most popular in the class; it was, in fact, because he was quite the opposite. Austin was struggling in school and he had no friends, nor any enthusiasm to learn. In my heart I knew he would be a challenge, but I wanted challenge.

Right away, I realized that helping Austin was going to be harder than I initially thought. He had absolutely no motivation! My primary job was to give him the "yearn to learn." Every day Ms. Schwarz gave me some time alone with Austin during centers, and each time I tried to introduce a new learning activity to him that was fun to do. For example, one time I brought in an interesting book that was easy for him to read. Afterwards we would go over the words that caused him some difficulty. After a couple of weeks I realized that Austin was enjoying the attention and in turn, was beginning to get excited to read and work with me.

Two weeks before spring break, I noticed the other kids were interacting more with Austin. I assumed this was because he was reading better now and becoming more confident in himself. I then decided I would give Austin a book to read that was a level higher than he had normally been reading. By the middle of the week, I was doubting my decision. His frustration was breaking my heart. However, Austin refused to give up; he was determined to read the whole book by himself. Every day that I didn't work with him that week, Ms. Schwarz told me that Austin worked on the book in his free time. The last day before spring break, Austin continued to try and read the book. I wanted to cry, but he taught me a valuable lesson that I had never really thought about before – if you want something badly enough, you should do everything you can to achieve it. Austin wanted to read that book, and I knew in my heart that he was going to do everything he could to read it.

While away on spring break, I thought about Austin and wondered what I was going to do when I came back. I considered whether we should move on to a different book or work some more on the current one.

I dreaded coming back that first day—I still had no idea what to do. But, as soon as I walked into the classroom, I was greeted by a huge smile and hug from Austin. Before I could even

question his glowing grin, he sat me down and read the whole book to me without any help. I couldn't stop the tears that welled up in my eyes. He was so proud of himself and so was I.

Austin's accomplishment was greater than any reward I think I have ever received.

Cunningham, a member of the Loudoun Education Association, teaches at Broad Run High School. Scharf is now a college student, preparing for a teaching career. ▶

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